

## THE WATER AND SOIL CONSERVATION SOCIETY?

A VIEWPOINT FROM THE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION SOCIETY'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

A friend called recently to compliment me on the 2006 annual conference program. He went on to say that he thought we needed to change our name to the Water and Soil Conservation Society because so much of the conference program was about water. I told him I was about as interested in changing the name of our Society as I was giving away all my fly rods.

We were both joking, of course, but his comment has stuck with me because there is some truth in his observation. Managing, conserving, and protecting water resources has moved to center of our agenda. Work related to water resources dominates articles in the *Journal*, presentations at our annual conferences, and is increasingly the focus of our special projects. We didn't consciously plan this transition. Instead, I think we are responding to what is going on in the larger community.

Recently I heard an expert predict that water will replace oil as the resource of greatest concern to the global community—there are alternatives to oil, but there are no alternatives to water. Globally, 4 out of 10 people currently live in river basins experiencing water scarcity. By 2025, 3.5 billion people—nearly half the world's population are predicted to face water shortages. At a recent workshop we held about the Great Lakes, I was told that even in water-rich Wisconsin there is growing concern over streams running dry because industrial water withdrawals are depleting base flow. And worries about physical scarcity are multiplied many times over by pollution of those water resources we have.

Conservation on agricultural and other working land has a central role to play in

managing water resources. Globally, ground water aquifers are being over pumped by 160 billion cubic meters a year to irrigate agriculture. In the United States, 65 percent of all water withdrawals are for irrigation. And nationally, agriculture is the leading source of pollution in rivers and streams and is the source of 40 percent of impairments in lakes. It's no wonder conservation and protect of water resources has become so important to our Society's agenda.

Managing working landscapes to enhance water resources is among the greatest challenges confronting agriculture, conservationists, and the scientific community. And here there is reason for optimism because of advances in the science and practice of conservation. It looks to me as if we are beginning to transform "nonpoint" pollution into "multiple" point pollution because of our growing ability to pinpoint those parts of the landscape that are contributing the bulk of pollutants. Article after article in the *Journal* confirms that there are major opportunities to manage farming, grazing, and forest production systems in ways that enhance environmental performance and profitability.

And in the end, managing water resources takes us back to managing soils. Water is a product of the land and land is a product of soils. Soil conservation and management is and always will be a cornerstone of water conservation.

Soil and Water Conservation Society or Water and Soil Conservation Society—it seems like asking which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Maybe what we are really evolving into is the watershed conservation society.



Craig A. Cox, executive director for the Soil and Water Conservation Society since 1998.